

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

Contra El Viento (Against the Wind) is, as the editor Dr. Blanca Garcia has so rightfully pointed out, "a profound book which takes the reader in a journey through the peaks and valleys of life; and it presents a philosophy of life which was true yesterday and still is today. Hard work and the will to work hard is the necessary ingredient which permits the meaningful realization of all dreams and aspirations." This is one of the great lessons that we can teach to our present young generation and one of the most valuable legacies that we can leave for future generations. There is so much to be learned by all. *Contra El Viento* should be recommended as an example of what the strong desire to succeed, hard work and fortitude really mean.

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Virgil Suarez. *Welcome to the Oasis and Other Stories*. (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991) 124 pp., \$9.50 paper.

If one is seeking a text to help expand the multicultural approach in a course on contemporary fiction or literature in general, a new collection of short stories by Virgil Suarez may be a successful addition. *Welcome to the Oasis and Other Stories* has the virtues of compactness in 124 pages and of variety in the length of the six works included, as well as a reasonable cost. An instructor would have the option of including the entire volume in her syllabus, which would provide an assignment easily encompassed in one or two class meetings. Or she could tuck in any one of the tales, ranging from fifty-four to eight large-print pages, wherever they might fit the design of the course.

Suarez's characters are Hispanic Americans of the Cuban variety, with the flavor of fried plantains, the rhythm of the marengue, and the fervent editorials of *La Opinion* as the background scene, whether the actual locale is Los Angeles, Miami, or somewhere in between. In his novels, such as *Latin Jazz* (1989), he has cogently analyzed the experience of the exiles from Castro's or Batista's Cuba as they struggle to integrate into the United States, often contrasting the attitudes of the earlier emigrés—such as the nineteenth-century cigar-makers in Key West and Tampa—to those of the newcomers who have moved in two or three generations later. Among his most poignant contrasts are those between the upper-class arrivals, who fled the leveling pressures of the Communist regime, and the Marielitos, who got out when Castro cynically (and pragmatically) responded to America's offer of asylum by sending off the inmates of his prisons and mental hospitals.

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Although the earlier novels concentrate on the class structure among the Cubans who were born on the island, the stories of this volume focus on their offspring—the new Americans born as natives on the mainland. Their problems tend to be less specific to the emigré and more universal among the youth of this country. While their parents and grandparents contended with a working knowledge of English, the trials of eking out a living in a hostile economy, and the apprehensions of bringing up children by inherited standards that often clashed with the surrounding mores, the youngsters worry about what other American boys and girls worry about: parents, jobs, school, drugs, the opposite sex.

Perhaps that is the primary message of multicultural literature—that the concerns of all Americans are basically the same, in spite of the individual cultural context. In these stories, the situations are familiar to all readers, even though the protagonists are named Quiroga, Candelaria, or Quezada. In “Welcome to the Oasis,” a lad without family connections takes the job of painting a rundown apartment house, only to find himself drawn into the explosive jealousies surrounding a seductive tenant. In “Headshots,” four college boys on a weekend jaunt into New Orleans experiment with hallucinogens, with nearly catastrophic consequences. In “Dearly Beloved,” an estranged son-in-law suddenly understands the loneliness and despair of his wife’s mother. In “Settlements,” the son of divorced parents struggles for stability in his own love affair. A high school boy seethes with summer resentment when he must accompany his father on ice-cream truck rounds when he would rather be swimming. Such tensions are universal in the lives of American youth, not only of those whose native tongue is Spanish.

Suarez’s narrative skills are varied and fruitful. His dialogue is authentic and compelling. In some stories a first-person voice holds the ear; in two others the present-tense action lends immediacy, as in the violence that breaks out in the family-run gambling game of “Full House.” Occasionally, there is expression of sympathy and appreciation for the self-sacrificing role of women in the male-dominated Cuban society. Danny, a high school boy who resents his father’s exploitation of his mother, thinks: “How does she do it? How does she juggle all the things that she does at the same time: cooking, dishes, laundry, cleaning?” Not to mention employment at the cannery. Such observations add much to the worth of these insightful paradigms.

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